

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MOSCOW 6669

EXDIS

E.O. 11652 GDS
TAGS: PINT, UR
SUBJ: BREZHNEV'S FUTURE: TO ENDURE OR TO RETIRE?

REF: MOSCOW 1958

1. SUMMARY. WHILE 2 MYRIAD OF PROBLEMS CONTINUE TO PLAGUE THE KREMLIN, WE CANNOT THINK OF ANY TIME IN THE PAST FIFTY-SEVEN YEARS WHEN THE LEADERSHIP WAS IN SO ADVANTAGEOUS A POSITION. IN ASIA, EUROPE AND THE MIDDLE EAST EVENTS SEEM TO BE COALESCING FAVORABLEY FOR THEM. DOMESTICALLY, THE ECONOMY IS IN RELATIVELY GOOD SHAPE, THE SOVIET CONSUMER SEEMS SATISFIED AT THE SLOW BUT STEADY IMPROVEMENT IN HIS LOT, AND THE BITTER POLICY DISPUTES THAT HAVE BEEN CHARACTERISTIC OF SO MUCH OF SOVIET HISTORY ARE NO LONGER IN EVIDENCE. ON THE SURFACE ALL IS HARMONY. IN FACT, THE ONLY CLOUD ON THE PRESENT SOVIET POLITICAL HORIZON IS BREZHNEV'S HEALTH AND THE MAJOR QUESTION IS WHETHER HE WILL DECIDE TO RETIRE IN GLORY AT THE NEXT PARTY CONGRESS -- AS PREDICTED BY SOME SOVIET OBSERVERS PRIVATELY AND WESTERN OBSERVERS PUBLICLY -- OR WHETHER HE WILL TRY TO SOLDIER ON UNTIL THE GRIM REAPER ARRIVES. THE HEALTH PROBLEM DOES NOT SEEM TO BE AS SERIOUS AS WAS THOUGHT LAST WINTER AND BREZHNEV HAS CERTAINLY SHOWN THE ABILITY TO RISE FOR AN OCCASION AND TO PERFORM CAPABLY WHEN CALLED UPON TO DO SO. CADRE
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PLACEMENT MANEUVERING IN PREPARATION FOR THE PARTY

CONGRESS HAS ALREADY BEGUN, BUT THE ONLY VISIBLE TRENDS
THUS FAR SHOW POLITICIANS IN PLACE BEFORE 1964 LOSING
SEATS. RUMORS OF BREZHNEV'S RETIREMENT COME FROM A
VARIETY OF COURCES BUT MAY BE SUSPECT. IN ANY CASE,
HIS DEPARTURE FOR ANYTHING OTHER THAN HEALTH REASONS
WOULD BE COMPLICATED BY THE FACT THAT THE NEXT FOUR
RANKING POLITBURO MEMBERS AFTER HIM -- KOSYGIN, PODGORNYY,
SUSLOV AND KIRILENKO -- ARE ALL AS OLD AS OR OLDER THAN HE.
THE ASSUMED RELUCTANCE OF BREZHNEV'S FOUR PEERS IN THE
SENIOR LEADERSHIP GROUP TO ACQUIESCE IN THE PRECEDENT OF
HIS STEPPING DOWN WOULD BE AN IMPORTANT FACTOR
IN CONVINCING BREZHNEV TO CONTINUE ONWARD AS TOP LEADER.
HIS POWERFUL PERSONAL SECRETARIAT, WHICH REPORTEDLY
HEAVILY INFLUENCES HIM, WOULD ALSO PRESUMABLY BE URGING
HIM TO MAINTAIN HIS POWER. IN ANY CASE, RETIREMENT
HAS LIMITED CHARMS FOR SOVIET POLITICIANS. OUR BEST
BET WOULD THEREFORE BE THAT AS LONG AS HIS HEALTH
HOLDS OUT BREZHNEV WILL NOT RELINQUISH THE CARES OF
OFFICE. END SUMMARY.

2. THE KREMLIN IS NOW ENJOYING ONE OF THE MOST STABLE
PERIODS IN ITS HISTORY. WHAT EXISTS OF THE POLITICAL
OPPOSITION IS AT A LOW POINT AND DECLINING AS A RESULT
OF SKILLFUL AND RELENTLESS PRESSURE. THE LEADERSHIP
IS ONLY THREATENED AT THIS MOMENT WITH ONE IMMEDIATE
DANGER -- THE FRAGILITY OF BREZHNEV'S HEALTH. AND THE
MOST IMPORTANT POLITICAL QUESTIONS OF THENEXT YEAR
LEADING UP TO THE 25TH CPSU CONGRESS IS WHETHER OR
NOT BREZHNEV WILL REMAIN PHYSICALLY ABLE TO PERFORM
HIS DUTIES.

3. SINCE OUR LAST ESTIMATE OF THE SOVIET POLITICAL
SITUATION (REFTEL), MORE LIGHT HAS BEEN SHED ON
BREZHNEV'S INFIRMITIES. ACCORDING TO FRG EMBASSY
SOURCE, IN ADDITION TO HIS CHRONIC CARDIO-VASCULAR
PROBLEMS HE IS NOW UNDERGOING A PROLONGED PROGRAM OF
DENTAL WORK WHICH SEEMS TO ACCOUNT FOR MUCH OF HIS
DISAPPEARANCE FROM PUBLIC LIFE. THERE ARE SOLID REPORTS
THAT THIS WILL AGAIN BE THE CASE DURING THE SECOND HALF
OF MAY. BREZHNEV, HOWEVER, HAS LATELY DEMONSTRATED
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SUFFICIENT PHYSICAL STAMINA AND ENDURANCE TO PERFORM
DURING MAJOR PUBLIC EVENTS, AND HE HAS IMPRESSED BOTH
FOREIGN STATESMEN AND EXPERIENCED BREZHNEV-WATCHERS
DURING PRIVATE NEGOTIATIONS WITH HIS MENTAL CLARITY,
ENERGY, AND OVERALL COMPETENCE. IN THE COMPANY OF
HIS PEERS HE CLEARLY SEEMS TO BE IN CHARGE. HIS
REMOVAL OF SHELEPIN IS FURTHER EVIDENCE -- IF ANY
WAS NEEDED -- THAT HIS POWER, IF ANYTHING, IS GROWING.

WE THEREFORE HAVE LITTLE DOUBT BUT THAT, BARRING ACTS OF GOD, BREZHNEV WILL BE ABLE TO MAINTAIN HIS POLITICAL PREDOMINANCE AT LEAST UNTIL THE NEXT PARTY CONGRESS WHICH IS NOW SLATED TO OPEN ON FEBRUARY 24, 1976.

4. FOLLOWING THE APRIL CPSU PEENUM, THE CELEBRATION OF THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF V-E DAY WAS USED BY THE SOVIET MEDIA TO EXTOL BREZHNEV, EXPECIALLY FOR HIS WARTIME CONTRIBUTIONS WHICH, BELATEDLY, ARE RECEIVING INCREASING RECOGNITION. BREZHNEV RECENTLY, BUT AT A DATE NOT PUBLICLY ANNOUNCED, RECEIVED A DOUBLE PROMOTION TO THE FOUR-STAR RANK OF ARMY GENERAL. AND THE WARTIME CAMPAIGNS IN WHICH HE TOOK PART ARE NOW GETTING LONG-DEALYED RECOGNITION: NOT ONLY WAS NOVOROSIYSK NAMED A HERO CITY LAST YEAR, BUT SOVIET HISTORIOGRAPHERS OF WORLD WAR II HAVE BEEN TOLD TO CONCENTRATE THEIR EFFORTS ON THIS RELATIVELY NEGLECTED AREA.

5. THE MAJOR POLITICAL ACTIVITY WITHIN THE CPSU IN 1975 WILL BE THE PWLACEMENT OF KEY PARTY OFFICIALS IN CENTRAL AND REGIONAL OFFICES DURING THE PRE-CONGRESSIONAL ROUND OF PARTY ELECTIONS. THIS PROCESS IS ALREADY UNDERWAY, AND THE REAAEMERGENCE OF THE CLASSIC SOVIET PATTERN OF MOSCOW "APPARATCHIKI" BEING SENT TO IMPORTANT REGIONAL POSTS (E.G., GEORGIAN SECOND SECRETARY, KIRGIZ SECOND SECRETARY, ETC.) BREAKS WITH THE PREVIOUSLY DOMINAT TENDECY UNDER BREZHNEV OF PROMOTING LOCAL CADRES TO FILL VACANCIES. THE REVERSION TO THE OLD CADRE PRACTICE INDICATES BOTH THE IMPORTANCE OF CADRE PLACEMENT FOR THE POLITICAL CAREERS OF LOCAL LEADERS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW

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POLITICAL LINEUPS FOR THE PERIOD AFTER THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS. AT THIS EARLY STAGE IN PARTY MANEUVERING, NO CLEAR PATTERN IS EVIDENT EXCEPT THAT PERSONS ASSOCIATED WITH BREZHNEV ARE NOT SUFFERING. THE ONLY OBSERVABLE TENDENCY IS THAT OFFICIALS APPOINTED BEFORE THE 1964 OUSTER OF KHRUSHCHEV BY BREZHNEV AND CO. SEEM TO BE MORE EXPENDABLE THAN MORE RECENT APPOINTEES.

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FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

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6. THE OUSTER ON APRIL 16 OF ALEKSANDR SHELEPIN AT THE CPSU PLENUM IS MORE THAN TESTIMONY TO BREZHNEV'S POLITICAL PERSISTENCE IN ATTACKING A FORMER RIVAL FOR THE TOP PARTY JOB. IT ALSO SUGGESTS THAT THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE POLITBURO WHO FORMERLY FOUND IT USEFUL TO RETAIN SHELEPIN AS A POLITICAL COUNTERBALANCE TO BREZHNEV ARE NOW THINKING OF THE POST-BREZHNEV SUCCESSION. THEY PROBABLY REASONED THAT, GIVEN THE UNCERTAINTY OF BREZHNEV'S HEALTH, THE TIME WAS RIGHT TO DISPOSE OF A POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS CONTESTANT AND THUS TO CLEAR THE WAY FOR OTHER CLAIMANTS.

7. RUMORS THAT BREZHNEV WOULD LIKE TO RETIRE AFTER THE 25TH PARTY CONGRESS HAVE BEEN SPREAD WITH DILIGENCE BY SEVERAL SOVIET SOURCES, AND HAVE BEEN PICKED UP BY THE WESTERN PRESS. SOME OF THESE RUMORS HAVE BEEN ATTRIBUTED TO SHELEPIN'S FOLLOWERS WHO MAY ALSO HAVE SPREAD EXAGGERATED REPORTS LAST WINTER OF BREZHNEV'S ILL HEALTH. VOLUNTARY RETIREMENT WHILE STILL AT THE TOP MIGHT WELL HAVE SOME APPEAL FOR BREZHNEV. AS WE HAVE POINTED OUT ELSEWHERE, NO SOVIET MAXIMUM LEADER AFTER LENIN HAS YET MADE IT INTO LOCAL HISTORY BOOKS AND BREZHNEV WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY BE ASSURED OF THIS HONOR IF HE WERE TO STEP DOWN AT THE 25TH CONGRESS. THOSE OBSERVERS WHO BUY THIS RETIREMENT THESIS THEREFORE DESCRIBE THE INCREASING

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GLORIFICATION OF BREZHNEV AND OF HIS "PERSONAL CONTRIBUTION" AS AN ACT OF PRELIMINARY APOTHEOSIS.

8. ON THE OTHER HAND THERE IS NO SOVIET
(AND WITH THE EXCEPTION OF NICHOLAS II, NO RUSSIAN)
PRECEDENT FOR STEPPING DOWN FROM THE TOP OFFICE, AND
THERE SEEMS TO BE NO VALID REASON OTHER THAN PHYSICAL
INCAPACITY FOR DOING SO. THERE IS NO PRIVATE SECTOR
HERE, AS IN WESTERN COUNTRIES, IN WHICH RETIRED
POLITICIANS CAN FUNCTION, AND THE INSTITUTION OF ELDER
STATESMEN IS NOT ESTABLISHED IN THE SOVIET UNION.
(THE NEAREST THING TO ONE IN THIS SOCIETY, MIKOYAN,
CUT A FORLORN FIGURE AT THE AMBASSADOR'S BUFFET FOR
THE HARRIMAN DELEGATION, WITH THE VARIOUS SOVIET GUESTS
TENDING TO IGNORE HIM.) FOR SOMEONE LIKE BREZHNEV WHO
HAS BEEN AN ACTIVE POLITICIAN ALL HIS LIFE AND
WHO SHOWS NO INTEREST IN ANY OTHER ACTIVITIES, RETIREMENT
WOULD PROBABLY BE A FORM OF EXQUISITE TORTURE.

9. EVEN MORE IMPORTANT, SHOULD BREZHNEV DECIDE TO
RETIRE AFTER THE NEXT PARTY CONGRESS, HE WOULD HAVE TO
SOLVE IN SOME WAY THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL SUCCESSION.
THERE ARE FOUR OTHER ELDERLY POLITICIANS WHO WITH
HIMSELF MAKE UP THE SENIOR STRATUM OF THE CPSU
POLITBURO - -PODGORNY, KOSYGIN, SUSLOV, AND
KIRILENKO. IF BREZHNEV WERE ABLE TO PASS ON THE
LEADERSHIP TO HIS CLOSE ASSOCIATE KIRILENKO THE BASIC
PROBLEM OF SUCCESSION WOULD NOT BE SOLVED BUT MERELY
POSTPONED BRIEFLY SINCE KIRILENKO IS THE SAME AGE AS
BREZHNEV. A COLLECTIVE FORM OF LEADERSHIP INCORPORATING
THE TOP FOUR WOULD BE NO BETTWE, SINCE THE OTHER
MEMBERS ARE EVEN OLDER. A MORE SATISFACTORY FORM OF
POLITICAL SUCCESSION WOULD BE THE TRANSFER OF TOP
POWER TO ONE OF THE YOUNGER MEN NOW SITTING ON THE
POLITBURO. BUT FROM BREZHNEV'S VIEWPOINT THERE WOULD SEEM
TO BE ONLY TWO FAVORITE CANDIDATES -- KULAKOV
AND SHCHERBITSKIY -- ALGHOUTH MAZUROV MIGHT HAVE A
CHANCE. HOWEVER, THE SELECTION OF A "YOUNG MAN" IN
HIS LATE FIFTIES OR EARLY SIXTIES WOULD INVOLVE
BYPASSING THE REMAINING TOP FOUR SENIOR LEADERS IN A
MANNER WHICH MAINTAINED THE FACADE OF COLLECTIVE
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LEADERSHIP AND DID NOT WRECK THE POLITBURO AS IT IS NOW
CONSITUTED. THE AVAILABLE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THIS WOULD
REQUIRE A MAJOR STRUGGLE AND THAT BREZHNEV -- CAUTIOUS
LEADER THAT HE IS -- WOULD NOT HAVE THE STOMACH TO
ENGAGE IN SUCH A FIGHT. IN ANY CASE, BOTH SHCHERBITSKIY
AND KULAKOV WOULD NEED BROADER EXPERIENCE BEFORE THEY
COULD BE CONSIDERED FOR CPSU FIRST SECRETARY.

10. THUS, OUR BEST GUESS WOULD BE THAT BREZHNEV

WILL CONCLUDE THAT THE BETTER ALTERNATIVE TO A
POLITICAL BATTLE OVER THE SUCCESSION IS SIMPLY TO
STAY ON IN OFFICE AND DIE WITH HIS BOOTS ON, AS HAVE
ALL THE CPSU GENERAL SECRETARIES BEFORE HIM
EXCEPT KHRUSHCHEV -- WHO WOULD HAVE CLEARLY PREFERRED
THAT OPTION.
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